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Stakeholder perceptions of regulatory responses to misinformation in Kenya and Senegal

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Abstract

While misinformation is very prevalent in Africa, we have a limited understanding of how key stakeholders, such as journalists, fact-checkers, policy experts, and educators, perceive responses to misinformation to address its spread. Based on an analysis of 46 interviews with media professionals and other key stakeholders from Kenya and Senegal, we find divergent perceptions of what regulatory interventions are needed to slow the spread of misinformation in the two countries. In Kenya, stakeholders advocated for self-regulation rather than government intervention to curb misinformation, while in Senegal, they called for more government regulations to address its spread. Additionally, interviewees perceived regulatory approaches, such as proposed laws to address misinformation, as reactive solutions, often resulting from a specific incident in the country,

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and educational approaches, such as requiring media literacy education in schools, as sustainable solutions with potentially longer-term outcomes.

Keywords
Fact-checking, Global South, interviews, Kenya, media literacy, misinformation, regulations, Senegal

The spread of misinformation has raised concerns about its causes, impact, and strategies to combat its production and dissemination. In Africa, researchers have identified various sources of misinformation, including political and religious leaders, the media, interest groups, and digital media users (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021). The proliferation of misinformation has influenced political elections, impacted the justice system, and adversely affected the economy (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021). It has also contributed to stoking violence and social unrest (Adegoke, 2018), stereotyping of communities (Tijani, 2019), and vaccine resistance (Faive Le-Cadre, 2019). Addressing the challenges posed by misinformation in Africa requires long-term strategies involving various stakeholders (Tully et al., 2022). These strategies include producing and disseminating fact-checks, enhancing media literacy, and implementing legal and regulatory frameworks for media production and information dissemination (Bontcheva et al., 2020; Mudavadi and Madrid-Morales, in-press; Wasserman, 2020).

This study emphasizes macro-level approaches, specifically institutional and regulatory responses, given their potential to alter information ecosystems and how stakeholders perceive them. To understand these perceptions, we focus on Kenya and Senegal, two African countries where misinformation has been widely reported. Our study draws on data from 46 in-depth interviews conducted in 2021 with Kenyan and Senegalese media professionals (e.g., journalists, fact-checkers, editors) and other actors involved in the fight against misinformation (e.g., policy experts, university professors, religious leaders). We focus on these two countries because they have diverse media environments and are described as "partly free" by House, 2022, suggesting that information flows somewhat openly. However, they also differ in several ways (e.g., linguistically and culturally), thus presenting valuable opportunities for cross-national comparisons.

This research is essential for several reasons. First, examining Kenya and Senegal provides a broader perspective on responses to misinformation. Second, our focus on how stakeholders perceive responses to misinformation can shed light on ways to address misinformation directly relevant to Global South communities. Third, this research highlights macro-level responses that affect media practitioners and audiences. By exploring responses that impact journalistic and media practices and the distribution, circulation, and consumption of news and information, this research addresses the "sociotechnical mix" of actors and actions involved in both the spread and response to misinformation (Saurwein and Spencer-Smith, 2020: 833). In doing so, it builds on previous work that examined the range of actors and actions involved in addressing misinformation from an audience perspective (Tully et al., 2022) to add insights from critical stakeholders—journalists, fact-checkers, policy experts, educators, and community leaders—in the misinformation ecosystem.

Misinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa

In Sub-Saharan Africa, as in other parts of the world, *information disorder* manifests through a mix of mis-, dis- and mal-information (see, Wardle and Derakhstan, 2017, for definitions). It is also characterized by "the distorted focus of the information available to the public" as well as "the denial of easy public access to credible information" (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021: 19). Spreaders of misinformation include political actors, legacy media, public institutions, businesspeople, religious authorities, groups with unique interests, networks that thrive offline, and online media users (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021). Misinformation circulates through many channels, such as traditional media, social media platforms, and messaging apps. However, it is also conveyed through communications in official settings such as parliaments or public gatherings. It is more prevalent during catastrophes, accidents, and crimes, particularly affecting the judicial, healthcare, political, economic, and media sectors. Psychological, political, and financial factors are the main motives for creating and sharing misinformation (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021).

Studies on how misinformation spread across the continent during disease outbreaks are abundant and illustrative of some unique patterns. With Ebola, the spread of fear and misinformation through legacy media, as well as Facebook and Twitter (now X), complicated the fight against the disease (Muzembo et al., 2022). Potentially harmful misinformation about remedies, cures, and precautions was also spread online. Some people who believed that Ebola was caused by witchcraft sought a cure from traditional healers. Luckerson (2014) compared the spread of false information about Ebola to an online virus, where "infected" Internet users were "infecting" others with false information that is then spread using social media posts.

The fight to counter misinformation about Ebola was even more difficult because people tended to trust the information they obtained from their acquaintances. Survey research in the Democratic Republic of Congo revealed that conspiracy theories (e.g., "Ebola did not exist" or "Ebola was a political fabrication") were highly prevalent (Chowdhury et al., 2021). The rise of conspiracy theories led to mistrust and hostility towards foreign health workers and NGOs and the stigmatization of Ebola survivors and health professionals (Allgaier and Svalostog, 2015). In Nigeria, where people died from harmful self-medication, an information minister had to issue a statement declaring that drinking a lot of salt water would not treat Ebola (Adepoju, 2021).

Other diseases have also been subject to misinformation and conspiracy theories on the continent. HIV and AIDS has often been described as a genocidal conspiracy invented by the West (Akande et al., 2011), and rumors spread that the aural polio vaccine was an anti-fertility drug designed to sterilize Africans, especially young Muslim girls (Adepoju, 2021). Similarly, COVID-19 misinformation spread widely. In Sub-Saharan Africa, as was elsewhere, vaccine-hesitant healthcare workers were often accused of spreading false information about the vaccines (Adepoju, 2021). However, the pandemic revealed the presence of other actors, including high-ranking officials, who contributed to disseminating misinformation. For instance, in Tanzania, the late President John Magufuli challenged the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines and negated the existence of SARS-CoV-2 in the country (Adepoju, 2021).

Concerns about misinformation in Kenya and Senegal, the two countries this study focuses on, extend beyond health-related falsehoods. In Kenya, political misinformation—often referred to as rumors—is a mainstay of political life (Nyabola, 2018). Decades of electoral disputes, usually fueled by misinformation, have created an environment where politicians and other powerful actors are often perceived as purveyors of false information and untrustworthy sources (Shiundu and Jimenez, 2022; Tully, 2022). The media and government are perceived as highly untrustworthy (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022). Regulatory responses to address misinformation in Kenya include the Computer Misuse and Cyber Crimes Act of 2018, which criminalizes the dissemination of false information and imposes a fine of $50,000 or a maximum of two years imprisonment for offenders (Gicheru, 2021). Critics of this bill note that it can be used to squash dissident voices and could have negative implications for free speech in the country (Budoo-Scholtz, 2020). The bill does little to get at the root causes of misinformation and criminalizes individual action instead of focusing on larger structural issues and institutions (Tully, 2022).

Senegal is not immune to declining trust in media either. This has also affected its political institutions (Sall, 2015) and government discourse, as evidenced by high vaccine hesitancy during the COVID-19 pandemic (Seydou, 2022). However, unlike many other African countries where citizens trust government-owned media more than private broadcasters (Moehler and Singh, 2011), Senegal stands out as one of the few African states where citizens trust private news organizations more than public media (Corman and Hitchcock, 2013). This can be attributed to the state's long-standing tradition of media capture in Senegal and the perceived role of private media, particularly radio broadcasters, in the regime change in 2000 (Diop, 2022). Despite the perception of a relatively free press, there are concerns among the public about the proliferation of misinformation on digital media platforms, and there are calls for government intervention to ban its dissemination (Diallo, 2021).

Responses to misinformation

The spread of misinformation is influenced by the behavior of five types of actors and actions in the misinformation ecosystem: instigators, agents, messages, intermediaries, and targets or interpreters (Bontcheva et al., 2020). Countering their actions requires multi-prong efforts (Mudavadi and Madrid-Morales, in press; Tully et al., 2022). While many initiatives to curb the rampant spread of misinformation have been discussed, Bontcheva et al. (2020) identify four main types of responses used by scholars to classify responses to misinformation.

The first response type (*identification responses*) aims to identify, debunk, and expose misinformation. This response involves monitoring, fact-checking, and investigating false claims. It has been employed by individuals, media, and fact-checking organizations to mitigate the presumed effects of misinformation (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill, 2018;

Tully, 2022). Roozenbeek et al. (2023) discuss four categories of interventions for countering misinformation at the individual level: *boosting* interventions (which include pre-bunking and psychological inoculation, critical thinking, and training for media and digital literacy), *nudging* interventions (which take the forms of accuracy prompts and social norms interventions), *debunking* (which includes fact-checking and corrections), and *content labeling* which encompasses automated content labels (Roozenbeek et al., 2023). The objective of boosting interventions, also known as pre-debunking (Altay, 2024), is to allow people to improve their competence in making choices by reducing their vulnerability to misinformation. Contrary to debunking, which consists of correcting falsehoods and their harmful effect, pre-debunking or boosting helps identify false claims thanks to understanding manipulation techniques.

The second type of response (*aimed at producers and distributors*) looks at governance-based and regulatory responses. This involves governmental as well as organizational regulations aimed at curbing misinformation. This set of strategies alters the environment that governs and shapes the behavior of all the actors involved in the production and spread of misinformation. This type of response includes both national and international laws and regulatory frameworks. Like some European countries (Saurwein and Spencer-Smith, 2020), African nations have also enacted laws to combat misinformation (Funker and Falmini, 2018; Poynter, 2018). Investigating the perceptions of these laws and their effectiveness can provide valuable lessons for other countries worldwide facing similar challenges.

The third approach (*responses aimed at the production and distribution mechanisms*) focuses on individuals and institutions involved in content moderation. This approach focuses heavily on platforms and technology central to the online information environment (Bontcheva et al., 2020). This approach involves curation and the application of technological responses to misinformation, such as automating content moderation or using algorithmic tools such as Botometer, which adopt machine learning approaches to detect bots (Zhao et al., 2021).

Finally, Bontcheva et al. (2020) propose using normative and ethical approaches (*responses aimed at audiences*), such as empowering and educating target audiences about misinformation. For instance, Spinney (2019) reports how community engagement approaches have been used in Congo to fight the spread of misinformation about Ebola, while Ndiaye and Rowley (2021) describe the use of music in Senegal as a response. While discussing responsibilities for addressing misinformation, this study focuses on the perception of regulatory responses, which fit under *responses aimed at producers or distributors*. Regulatory approaches have the potential to restrict personal freedoms and impact producers and audiences in negative ways. However, they could also be developed to mitigate the spread of misinformation and promote a more robust news and information environment (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021; Marchant and Stemlau, 2020). Altay (2024) argues that traditional forms of education, like media and digital literacy programs that include critical thinking skills, can help people recognize misinformation. Additionally, media and digital literacy interventions increase skepticism toward unreliable sources and credible information.

Regulatory approaches to misinformation

With misinformation becoming more ubiquitous, some countries have adopted regulations to eliminate or minimize the spread and impact of false information. Kenyon (2007) posits that there is no general regulation of misinformation under international laws; hence, states are free to formulate their laws. The sovereignty to regulate content is only limited if there is a treaty obligation restricting states to do so, such as the respect for freedom of expression under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) as outlined below:

> Any restrictions on the operation of websites, blogs, or any other Internet-based, electronic, or other such information dissemination system, including systems to support such communication, such as Internet service providers or search engines, are only permissible to the extent that they are compatible with paragraph 43 [of Article 19]. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011).

Helm and Nasu (2021) outline three approaches that governments have adopted in recent years to address misinformation: (a) content removal or blocking, (b) criminal sanctions, and (c) information correction. Content removal or blocking is a more intrusive form of regulating misinformation. It involves blocking or removing false content. Analogous to censorship and restraint—traditional ways of restricting media content—content removal and/or blocking is targeted at specific content. In a UN Special Rapporteur report about promoting and protecting freedom of opinion and expression rights, it was declared that several governments have formulated and implemented legislations that grant authorities excessive powers to compel social media platforms to remove content they deem illegal or misinformation. Failure to comply with these legislations is sanctioned with content blocking and significant fines (United Nations, 2021). However, there are concerns that this method could lead to media "gagging" if employed overly broadly or indiscriminately (Adegoke, 2018).

Criminal sanction is another approach that has been used. In Cameroon, the government formulated policies that sanction the publication or reproduction of any false statement that can cause public ridicule, hatred, or contempt (Helm and Nasu, 2021). In Uganda, a similar law, the Computer Misuse Act, which aimed to ban the use of disguised or false identities online, faced global criticism for silencing those critical of the government (Athumani, 2022). Internet shutdowns as an extreme intervention to prevent online threats have also been observed, especially in Cameroon, Chad, Myanmar, India, and Iran (Marchant and Stremlau, 2020), as well as Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe (Gopaldas, 2019).

The third approach is misinformation correction. This approach is the least intrusive since it does not directly interfere with false text. Instead, it creates a designated platform where the falsity of content can be publicly announced. Social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook have used this approach by publicly labeling false content (Perez, 2020). Government institutions, media houses, or fact-checking organizations use similar information correction techniques, such as *Factcheck.org* and *Africa Check* (Young et al., 2017).

Concerns have been raised about the consequences of some of these regulatory approaches. For instance, the Computer and Cyber Crime Bill enacted in Kenya in 2018 elicited fears that improper wording could be used to suppress freedom of speech (Funker and Falmini, 2018). In Uganda, the government introduced a “daily social media tax” ($.05) on WhatsApp, Facebook, and X users (Akumu, 2018). Bloggers in Tanzania must pay $920 to post content online because the government perceives them as purveyors of false content (Mutsvairo and Bebawi, 2019). In Egypt, parliament passed a media law in 2018 that granted the government power to pull down false articles and/or account(s) that were spreading false information (Reuters, 2018). While these regulatory approaches can work in some liberal democracies, they can also be used to suppress freedom of speech, limit the publication of investigative stories in newsrooms, and silence opposition voices in other political contexts, particularly in the Global South. Against this backdrop, we ask: RQ1: Which groups or institutions do stakeholders perceive responsible for addressing misinformation in Kenya and Senegal? RQ2: How do stakeholders perceive regulatory responses as a means of addressing misinformation in Kenya and Senegal?

Method

After approval by Institutional Review Boards at the University of Iowa and the University of Houston, we conducted 46 semi-structured in-depth interviews ($N_{Kenya} = 24$; $N_{Senegal} = 22$) with media professionals (e.g., journalists, fact-checkers, and editors) and other relevant stakeholders (e.g., policy experts, religious leaders, and university professors) in Kenya and Senegal. The interviews were conducted via Zoom/phone in English or French between March and June 2021. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their efficiency in eliciting participant perspectives (Warren and Karner, 2015) and flexibility in addressing understudied areas (Brennen, 2013). Journalists, fact-checkers, and policy experts were included in this study because comprehending their perceptions is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of current policies and proposing up-to-date recommendations. Religious leaders were included because of their crucial role in shaping community worldviews.

Purposive and snowball sampling were used for recruitment. Despite efforts to reach gender parity, our sample includes more males (63%) than females. We purposively approached individuals who identified as journalists, reporters and editors, fact-checkers, policymakers, government officials, and academics with expertise in media and regulations (see Online Appendices I & II). In the early stages of the interviews, religious leaders emerged as a group that addresses misinformation in several communities—thus, their inclusion. All participants were promised anonymity and are identified in this manuscript using a number.

The interviews were conducted with slightly different semi-structured guides, depending on the interviewee’s role. Interviews started with a general introduction about the interviewees’ professional role(s) and were followed by questions about misinformation (e.g., *what does "fake news"/dis- misinformation mean to you?*) and possible solutions to misinformation (e.g., *in your view, who is most responsible for the spread of misinformation?*). Next, we asked questions targeted to specific groups: journalists, for instance, were asked about the impact of COVID-19 on journalism (e.g., *have you worked on any stories around COVID-19?*); fact-checkers were asked about their fact-checking roles (e.g., *who are the main targets of fact-checking in your countries of operation*); and policymakers were probed on regulation in the context of COVID-19 (e.g., *"what is your view around introducing legislation to curb the spread of misinformation?*).

All interviews were audio recorded (Min = 23 min; Max = 68 min), transcribed using *otter.ai* for English and *happyscribe.com* for French, and then checked by a native speaker of English/Swahili for Kenya and French/Wolof for Senegal because some participants switched languages during the interview. All transcriptions were translated into English before we conducted a thematic analysis using NVivo, commonly used for qualitative analysis (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). We derived the codebook from previous research and through multiple rounds of coding. The final version of the coding instrument included seven themes (e.g., *"fact-checking"* or *"responses"*) and 51 sub-themes (e.g., under the theme *"responsibility"*, we identified sub-themes such as *"role of individuals"*, *"role of NGOs"*, *"role of journalists"*). All the research team members participated in the final coding of the transcripts.

Perceived responsibility for addressing misinformation

Participants from both countries perceived a shared responsibility among key actors to address misinformation. However, 40 out of 46 participants indicated that the government, legacy, and digital media platforms were the *most* responsible. As noted by a Kenyan fact-checker (KE012), while "social media users do not have any obligation from anybody on whether they spread correct or false information," they have a role in ensuring that they verify the information they share on digital media platforms, especially WhatsApp, where control of the spread of misinformation and its effects is difficult. This role, as noted by a Kenyan creative producer (KE003), was limited "to what they [digital media users] understand and what they know," thus highlighting the importance of media literacy, as others have found in the past (Tully et al., 2022; Vraga et al., 2021). These individual behaviors were not only limited to sharing and posting verified information but also reporting the accounts that spread misinformation to respective digital media platforms, scouting for misinformation and correcting them by embedding 'factual' news in the comments section and rallying political leaders and bloggers to actively inform the public about the dangers and spread of misinformation.

Participants expressed an overwhelming belief that the government is vital in addressing misinformation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when the thirst for information was high and the spread of misinformation was rampant. Kenyan participants noted that the government's primary role is to ensure the implementation of laws governing the spread of false narratives online, countering misinformation with facts through ministerial websites, social media platforms, and conferences, and debunking misinformation. Their Senegalese counterparts called for the government to improve, strengthen, and empower legal frameworks and regulatory bodies, provide financial support to organizations tackling misinformation, supervise the operations of digital media platforms, and create awareness of the effects of existing misinformation. Notably, Kenyan participants expressed frustration in accessing public records and/or officials when they needed official information to counter false narratives online; thus, its spread and effects were overwhelming. Participants also noted that governments should institutionalize media literacy in educational institutions while investing in journalism for the public good. These views are represented in the following quotes from a Senegalese journalist and a Kenyan fact-checker:

> The government must provide training. It must identify and supervise all these people who have social media platforms. They must work on that. It must know the origins of these platforms—where they live, their addresses, names, etc. Once that is done, we must train social media users because people don't have this digital culture, and often, they haven't been trained well in digital use. If we are not trained, what should I publish? (SN005)

> I think the government's role in addressing misinformation is to ensure that data is readily available to journalists. For instance, in the US, debunking is very easy because data is readily available for journalists to debunk misinformation. However, in Kenya, getting data is just a hassle. (KE012)

Regarding legacy media, 41 interviewed participants from both countries believed they had an essential role in addressing misinformation. For example, those from Kenya noted several strategies the media can adopt to address misinformation. First, journalists were expected to acknowledge their mistakes after posting narratives that turned out to be false. For example, one participant shared that the legacy media published false information about the death of Daniel Arap Moi (former president of Kenya) on multiple occasions, yet he was still alive. Relatedly, they called for an extended role of journalism beyond just being a "watchdog" to verify information, educate the public on media literacy roles, scout the digital media for misinformation, and counter it with facts. This finding is consistent with recent scholarship that has shown the impact of misinformation on journalistic role conceptions and perceptions (Balod and Hameleers, 2021; Schapals and Bruns, 2022).

Senegalese participants called for the media to institutionalize fact-checking roles in newsrooms and expedite their pre-bunking and debunking efforts. Also, participants from both countries recognized the need for the media houses to work jointly when addressing misinformation. For example, syncing fact-checking roles between digital and legacy media to target audiences without access to digital media platforms. Notably, they also emphasized the need for the press to verify the information before publishing. Participants also advocated for internal training to prepare journalists for the growing demands of digital media. For example:

> … the traditional media are not spared by the phenomenon (misinformation) at all because the problem with the traditional media is that now, whether in Senegal or elsewhere, we are in

> such a race for the scoop that we don't necessarily take the time to check the information that we broadcast. This means that sometimes, the traditional media publishes false or incomplete information. (SN008)

For social media platforms, participants from both countries believed they have an essential role in addressing misinformation. For instance, Kenyan participants noted that social media companies should debunk false news with fact-checkers, shut down accounts perpetrating false information, filter messages before publication, and permanently remove content. On the other hand, Senegalese participants described Facebook's fact-checking initiative as laudable and called for suspending accounts spreading false information. They advocated for social media platforms to raise awareness of misinformation through online campaigns. Additionally, one male Senegalese journalist shared that social media platforms need to suspend accounts peddling misinformation like X did in the "United States… with President Donald Trump. Additionally, he noted, "…we haven't seen any overt censorship [like that] here in Senegal" (SN009).

However, participants noted that social media platforms' responses were often limited. Participants emphasized the potential of collaboration between social media companies and fact-checkers in addressing misinformation as a way platforms can slow the spread of misinformation (Jennings and Stroud, 2021). Participants called for platforms to increase their debunking and fact-checking efforts to address false information. In addition, they called for the closure or suspension of accounts perpetrating misinformation (Helm and Nasu, 2021). In the views of a Kenyan educator and Senegalese university dean:

> They are supposed to create filters that should cut out false information. I think it is possible, especially with the advances in technology… to create filters that will pick out certain words and hold the message until they are validated as truth before it is published for everybody to consume. (KE022)

> When a piece of false information is published, even if they can't remove it, they can attach a badge to say that this information is not verified. The promoters of these platforms can also set up modules to better explain warnings. Well, sometimes this work is necessary, but in a way, for me, the people who have these platforms and who know what is being done on them are the ones who are primarily responsible; that is the first aspect. The second aspect is governments. (SN003)

During discussions, participants also noted the critical role of politicians and religious leaders in addressing misinformation. Political goodwill was mentioned as an effective way of addressing misinformation in Kenya. For example, a Kenyan policymaker noted that "the government has a role in addressing misinformation, but you cannot fight misinformation without political goodwill… we need leadership that pays attention to the effects of fake news and understands fake news, not just from political, economic or health perspectives, but from all angles" (KE016). Religious leaders were also expected to verify information before sharing it with the congregants, as noted by a Kenyan priest:

> Yes, the church does have a role, especially the pastors, who are the primary agents of dispatching the information through the pulpits. They are the voices of the prophets, in our times, the church, their ministers, they must proclaim that which is correct… (KE020)

Overall, participants perceived institutions—government, legacy media, and social media platforms—as the most responsible for addressing misinformation as they were perceived to have the capacity and ability to reduce the spread of misinformation. For instance, legacy media were expected to intensify training to match the demands of the digital media environment. At the same time, governments were seen as essential for implementing laws to mitigate the spread of misinformation.

Perceptions of regulatory responses

Most participants (43 of 46) from both countries were aware of laws or regulations created to punish those who create and spread misinformation on digital media platforms. However, these laws or regulations were not being enforced. Participants shared that those spreading misinformation would get away with breaking the law because they "knew they can" (Kenyan university professor—KE016). The concern was not the existence of the law but its implementation. Therefore, they did not see the need for new laws to tackle misinformation and its effects. For example:

> …there are already laws that exist, and if they were applied in the situation, they could fix the problem instead of trying to devise new ways to address the spread of false information. So, I wouldn't recommend more regulation; I would say just better enforcement. Once enforcement is done more effectively, we can identify and try fixing any existing loopholes in the systems. If it means new regulation based on that, I will support regulation to mitigate the spread of misinformation. (Fact-checker – KE011)

While participants from both countries shared a common understanding of the existence of laws and their execution, they differed on whether to trust their governments to implement existing and new laws to curb the spread of misinformation. A lack of trust in the government in Kenya to implement laws without limiting or impeding journalistic freedom and/or freedom of speech meant that media professionals would strongly oppose the use of laws or regulations to address misinformation—consistent with previous research on the use of laws to mitigate misinformation (Yadav et al., 2021). On the other hand, Senegalese media professionals called for the government to create stricter laws to address the spread of misinformation because they were concerned with the ease of both its spread and potential consequences, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As one Senegalese policymaker noted:

> We live with it, we must deal with it, and to deal with it, we must find the necessary safeguards. We must find the normal ranges where we must not transgress. So, in my opinion, we must support the enactment of laws today to legislate, to say no, to say "stop, this is not

> normal. This is not good," and that there must be punishments commensurate with the offenses committed. (SN006)

Kenyan media professionals described a history of untrustworthy regimes that have taken advantage of the law to silence investigative pieces by using fear and intimidation tactics (Kellam and Stein, 2016). As one Kenyan journalist shared,

> If we give this mandate to the government, the freedom of the press will suffer. We need to come up with mechanisms to improve the media literacy of various parts of the public. (KE006)

Self-regulation and increased fact-checking initiatives superseded the call or support for stricter laws among Kenyan media professionals. This was because of the fear of intimidation and the way the laws are written in Kenya—previous research has shown that how laws are worded affects audiences' perception of them to mitigate the spread of misinformation (Helm and Nasu, 2021). Kenyan participants noted that the provision of these laws was to punish the offenders rather than to deal with the problem. As such, it was not the panacea that they expected. This is captured in this narration by a Kenyan policymaker:

> I was discussing sections 22 and 20 of the Cyber Crimes Act and flagged that these provisions were excessively overbroad. They're essentially designed to capture and punish many digital technology users. So, on that front, they don't provide any legal certainty… the language used in the Computer Misuse Act to tackle mis- and disinformation in Kenya is very similar to the one used in the criminal defamation case declared unconstitutional. So, what these provisions have done in their attempt to deal with information disorders in Kenya is to re-introduce criminal defamation back into the country. We have seen many countries taking active steps to decriminalize criminal defamation. So, in sum, we recognize the necessity of legal responses. But they must be crafted in a manner that is clear that lends legal certainty and within certain jurisdictions, and we know that it is difficult to do that, especially because, you know, the issue of intent often comes into play during these discussions, because intent can be a very subjective process. (KE024)

Media professionals from Kenya perceived the implementation of laws as *immediate* solutions to addressing misinformation; however, they were often skeptical of their effectiveness. For example, Kenyan media professionals described using fines and creating an anti-misinformation act as short-term solutions that are not worth the effort. Participants from both nations noted that empowering social media users or enhancing their media literacy skills and training media professionals were beneficial in the long-term and perhaps more *sustainable* solutions to tackling misinformation (Tully et al., 2022). For example:

> By putting in place media literacy modules, social media, and new media especially. Today, there are many. I can even say that many of us use applications or platforms. But we don't

> understand all the issues. Many of us use the Internet but don't fully understand what's at stake because people think you can record an audio message, say whatever you want, disseminate it on different networks, and then risk nothing. In contrast, if you commit defamation, these offenses are punishable by the Criminal Code, even if you commit them on the Internet or social networks. (University dean – SN003)

> So, the right way to proceed is to foster a vibrant journalistic environment. Regarding self-regulation, the media regulator in Kenya is well-placed to handle complaints. Also, *Africa Tech* has done a commendable job… we are happy to have gotten where we are. (Fact-checker – KE002)

Participants described laws intended to punish the spreaders of misinformation in both countries. However, they differed in whether governments can be trusted to implement these laws without infringing on freedom of speech. Senegalese media professionals called for their government to introduce stricter laws. In contrast, Kenyan media professionals were concerned with the history of previous governing bodies using existing and new laws to intimidate journalists and silence investigative pieces. One Kenyan journalist mentioned, "If we give this mandate to the government, the freedom of the press will suffer" (KE006). Therefore, media literacy and training of media professionals on tackling misinformation were viewed as more efficient and sustainable means of addressing misinformation than using regulations deemed as immediate responses. Support for media literacy, fact-checking, and training of media professionals rather than regulations to address misinformation and its effects provides fertile ground for future research to examine this relationship.

Discussion

There is a growing consensus that misinformation in Africa is widespread, and its effects can be dire (United Nations, 2020). However, much about how African stakeholders perceive responses to curb its spread is unknown. This study examined the perceptions of key actors in addressing misinformation in Kenya and Senegal. Overall, the study found that participants from both countries recognized the shared responsibility of various actors in addressing misinformation, with the government, legacy media, and social media platforms being perceived as the most responsible. One of the key themes that emerged was the importance of media literacy in combating misinformation and the various ways that key actors could support media literacy efforts. Participants acknowledged that users have a role in verifying information shared on social media platforms but also recognized the limitations of individual media literacy. Therefore, the study underscores the importance of investing in media literacy programs in educational institutions, incorporating media literacy into journalistic practice, especially as a part of fact-checking efforts, and promoting media literacy on social media platforms through tags, tips, and other interventions tailored for social media environments (Cunliffe-Jones et al., 2021; Hameleers et al., 2022; Mutsvairo and Bebawi, 2019; Tully and Singer, 2024).

Participants highlighted the importance of legacy media in addressing misinformation. In Kenya, interviewees suggested that legacy media should acknowledge their mistakes, verify information before publishing, educate the public on media literacy roles, and scout digital media for misinformation. Meanwhile, Senegalese participants emphasized institutionalizing fact-checking roles in newsrooms and adopting pre-bunking and debunking efforts. Stakeholders in both countries emphasized the need for media houses to work together to address misinformation, particularly syncing fact-checking roles between digital and legacy media to target audiences without access to digital media platforms. This strengthens the calls for multi-prong efforts as the best approach to curb misinformation (Tully et al., 2022).

This study also found contrasting perceptions of regulations as a means of addressing misinformation in Kenya and Senegal. Participants in Kenya strongly called for self-regulation over government regulation to address misinformation. In contrast, their counterparts from Senegal called for further regulations to address misinformation. While these differences may be connected to differing trust in institutions, more research is needed to examine the causes or sources of these differences in perspectives. For instance, research shows that plummeting levels of media trust are linked with information disorder in the Global North and more selective consumption of news from social media platforms that are exposed to multiple messages, including dis-and misinformation (Hameleers et al., 2022), but is this the case in young democracies such as Kenya and Senegal?

Our findings are consistent with previous literature that shows concerns that governments' use of laws to slow the spread of false information could stifle press freedom and freedom of speech (Gopaldas, 2019; Kellam and Stein, 2016). Specifically, media professionals perceived regulations as an *immediate* solution and were worried about their implementation and effectiveness. Instead, they advocated for internal training of journalists, employing more fact-checkers in legacy media newsrooms, media literacy for audiences, and investing in fact-checking initiatives as long-term sustainable solutions. The main concern for Kenyan media professionals is how governing bodies execute laws and how the wording addresses misinformation (Funker and Falmini, 2018). Previous Internet shutdowns (Gopaldas, 2019) in neighboring countries could explain the more cautious approach among participants when considering the government's role in curbing misinformation.

We also reveal commonalities and differences in how participants perceive social media companies as actors suited to address misinformation. While they all agree that social media plays a vital role in stopping the spread of false information, some Senegalese participants advocated for stronger restrictions and more robust application of existing terms of service to suspend accounts and take down posts when users violate company guidelines. However, there is little agreement on what constitutes a violation in all contexts. These findings demonstrate the importance and challenge of considering cultural and societal contexts when addressing misinformation. In addition, advocating for more overt measures raises questions about freedom of speech and regulation of content on social media platforms. Future studies should continue to examine the implications of how social media companies respond to misinformation and the connection to freedom of speech, which varies widely around the globe.

This study offers several important takeaways. First, it contributes to the growing literature on the responsibility for addressing misinformation globally. Its significance lies in its focus on media professionals, often seen as sources of information *and* misinformation who regularly interact with other actors in the misinformation ecosystem (Bontcheva et al., 2020). Even though there has been emerging scholarship on the strategies for addressing misinformation in Africa, the area remains understudied (Wasserman, 2020). As such, this study fills this gap by contributing to debates around the efficiency of regulatory responses as a panacea for addressing misinformation. For instance, our findings suggest a disparity among media professionals in their perceptions of regulation. While interviewees call for stricter laws in Senegal, their Kenyan counterparts fear that laws could lead to less press freedom and infringement on freedom of speech. In both countries, media professionals prefer adopting media literacy, fact-checking, and training media actors as more "sustainable" solutions that are less likely to infringe on speech or require strong government intervention. In addition to calls for increased media literacy, participants described a key role for social media companies to increase their efforts to address misinformation that flows through their platforms. This remains a contentious social, political, and cultural issue as governments and individuals grapple with how to govern social media platforms.

Finally, the study has limitations, including a small number of participants from only two countries, so the findings should be interpreted cautiously. To produce more generalizable results, future research should consider using data collection methods that are more representative. While fact-checking and media literacy are considered "sustainable" solutions to combat misinformation, little empirical work has been done to examine their role in legacy media organizations in the Global South, for instance, whether journalists in this area practice fact-checking as *individual* or *organizational* roles (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill, 2018). Further research could provide valuable insights for addressing misinformation in this region. However, this study offers critical insight on the perceptions of Kenyan and Senegalese media professionals regarding roles, responsibilities, and regulations for addressing misinformation. These findings provide new insights into the Senegalese experience, enhancing our understanding of the Francophone context in Sub-Saharan Africa, a vastly understudied region in journalism and media studies.

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Supplemental Material

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